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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 002305

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREF PHUM PGOV KS KN
SUBJECT: HELP FOR NORTH KOREAN DEFECTORS: PRIVATE CHARITY
SUPPLEMENTING ROKG PROGRAMS

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: PolOff visited two government supported and two private institutions for helping student-age North Korean defectors: Hanawon, the re-education center where all defectors spend two months on arrival; Hangyerae School, where 220 students live and study; the Heavenly Dream School, which operates two campuses on a shoestring budget; and the House of Life, which provides support for pregnant defectors. Each institution features dedicated teachers and has had success stories, but there is also a sense that the increasing number of North Korean defectors (over 3,000 expected this year compared to 2,300 in 2007) is straining the capacity to integrate the defectors into the South Korean mainstream. End Summary.

Hanawon

¶12. (SBU) All defectors arriving in South Korea are required to go through a two-month re-education program at Hanawon, an attractive facility in a rural area south of Seoul. Hanawon is an integral part of the ROKG- designed four stages of settlement support: 1. Request for protection to overseas missions; 2. Joint government investigation; 3. Social adaptation and education (in Hanawon); 4. Settlement support in local community. After verifying bona fides during the joint government investigation, defectors are sent to Hanawon to learn different aspects of the South Korean society, ranging from language to pop culture. According to Hanawon administrator Kwon Yong-chul, the time spent in Hanawon coincided with the time required to process defectors' Korean national ID number -- a must-have for living in South Korea.

¶13. (SBU) Kim Dong-hyun, in charge of Hanawon statistics, shared that Hanawon hosted 2,627 residents from January to November 2008. This year, 2,060 women were sent to the main Hanawon complex located in Ansung and 567 men were sent to a separate location in Siyoung. The residents arrive at two-month intervals, usually more than one hundred residents at a time. The next batch, the "122nd class," is scheduled to arrive on December 8. Construction of additional dormitories and classrooms to accommodate the increasing number of defectors is scheduled to be completed by mid-December 2008. These additional facilities in Ansung will allow Hanawon to host up to 600 students at a time, doubling the current maximum capacity of 300.

¶14. (SBU) During a recent visit by poloff, the resident nurse noted that almost all female defectors, making up about 75 percent of the total, arrived with health issues, ranging

from untreated sexually transmitted diseases to unwanted pregnancy complications to dire need for dental treatment. These could be treated within Hanawon; for even more serious cases, she said, Hanawon residents were sent to a nearby village hospital.

Hangyerae Middle and High School

¶5. (SBU) The main Hangyerae school facility was completed in 2006 and is by far the largest, government-subsidized middle and high school for North Korean defectors. Embassy Seoul officers visit the school each month to interact with students. Currently about 220 students are enrolled in Hangyerae and the age of students range from 14 to 24. According to Principal Kwak Jong-moon, the school aimed to "transfer" students to South Korean middle and/or high schools, rather than to "graduate" them. Like at Heavenly Dream School, students and faculty members live together. Dorm rooms are on the top floor, originally built to accommodate five or six students per room, per teacher. Vice Principal Yun Do-hwa said that up to sixteen students now stay in one room because of lack of space to accommodate incoming students. Yun pointed out the prepared site for an additional building planned for next year, but said funding was not yet secured.

¶6. (C) In a separate conversation, math teacher Mr. Kim, who fled North Korea in 1999, said the current defector route is "heaven" compared with his experiences at that time. Kim said that brokers were not yet prevalent in China then and

"routes" were not established. He traveled through China and Burma, spending seven years before arriving in South Korea in March 2006. Kim commented that students were "more relaxed and healthier" after seven to ten days of arrival thanks to regular meals and warm lodging. When asked about the students' interaction with North Korean teachers compared to South Korean teachers, Kim admitted that there is a special connection between former North Korean residents. While students were close to all teachers, Kim noted that students tended to seek guidance from North Korean teachers on social difficulties. According to Vice Principal Yun, four of 19 faculty members were from North Korea. They are the math teacher (Kim), the science teacher (a former Kim Jong-il university graduate), an assistant administrator and a cook.

Heavenly Dream School

¶7. (SBU) Formally established in 2003, the Heavenly Dream School was created to address the educational needs of school-aged defectors, or Saeteomin. (NOTE: South Koreans who support defector resettlement efforts use the term "Saeteomin," which means "new settlers" in Korean, to describe North Korean defectors. One supporter explained that "Saeteomin" indicated hope for the future, while the term "defector" drew was a negative image of a citizen who fled his home country. END NOTE.) As the first Christian boarding school for North Korean children, Heavenly Dream School has assisted 170 students since inception. The school operates on two campuses, one in Seoul and another in Chunan, about 100 km southwest of Seoul. The Chunan branch is located inside the Chunan Theological School, and provides room and board for about 30 students. Both branches cater to children from grade K1 through high school, but the Seoul branch also provides additional sessions such as university entrance exam preparation and private tutoring for students already enrolled in universities. Currently, approximately 30 students are housed in six boarding units in Seoul. Students at both locations spend on average three years at Heavenly Dream School.

¶8. (SBU) Reverend Yim Chung-ae, principal at the school, explained that the biggest challenge for her institution was "funding, funding and funding." Private donations were the

only source of income for the Heavenly Dream School, which made it difficult for the administrators to plan and budget. To meet the monthly expenditure of approximately USD 30,000, Yim said she had applied for government assistance in previous years, but the Ministry of Unification (MOU) officials denied her request because of budget cuts. Yim said that mega churches have invited her and the students for an evening of testimony, which would have provided more lucrative fund-raising opportunities for the school, but Yim had turned down the invitations because "using" the students by asking them to speak publicly about their most painful and intense experiences would not have served the students well, psychologically and emotionally. Yim expected to continue facing financial hardships in the coming year.

¶9. (C) Yim had been assisting North Korean defectors since 1996, at first as a missionary in China. She was heavily involved with North Korean defectors in China and their escape route to third countries. Although she did not specify names, numbers and locations of organizations operating in China to assist North Korean defectors, Yim confirmed that the organizations are "numerous and effective." She shared that many defectors chose Christian faith after arrival in South Korea because most of them received assistance in China from these underground Christian organizations. Yim continued that applicants who applied to Heavenly Dream School obtained the school information only through word of mouth, through other Christian defectors. (NOTE: There are about ten alternative schools for North Korean defectors in the ROK. Many operate on a much smaller scale than government-funded Hangyerae Middle and High School. END NOTE.)

¶10. (C) Yim was proud of her students' progress. Many were enrolled in universities and some had even graduated and held white collar jobs in Seoul. As her next goal, Yim hoped to establish a scholarship fund for the university students who apparently were in desperate need. Students had to skip lunch daily because they did not have enough money for three meals a day. In addition, some students were also at risk of giving up their university education because they had to finance their living costs through part-time jobs.

¶11. (C) Yim recalled "dragging" a young, female student out of a hostess bar, where she began to work while enrolled at a university. The female student explained to Yim that the hostess job was the easiest and fastest way to earn money to support her living costs while not sacrificing too much time, because the rest of the time she needed to study. According to Yim, another student who majored in cooking began a similar part time job because she did not have enough money to purchase ingredients to practice cooking as required.

House of Life

¶12. (SBU) House of Life, located in a small village near Hanawon and Hangyerae, is a privately-funded Catholic organization established in 1993 to assist unwed pregnant women before and after giving birth. Sister Lucia, the chief administrator shared that House of Life had delivered over 90 babies born to Hanawon residents since the first such delivery in May 2005. According to Hanawon Principal Ko Kyung-bin, there was a time when "Hanawon babies" were born every twenty days in the House of Life. Sister Lucia commented that the number of pregnant North Korean defectors had dropped since the Beijing Olympic Games. She attributed decrease in defector pregnancies to tightened Chinese border control by both North Korean and Chinese authorities and "day-after pills."

¶13. (SBU) Besides North Korean women, Vietnamese, Chinese, and South Korean women were also residing at House of Life. A Chinese mother-to-be was 14 years old and was quite distressed, but her morale improved once a North Korean defector arrived with whom she could converse in Chinese,

Sister Lucia said. Vietnamese women were migrant workers who became pregnant after arriving in Korea. Previous residents include young women from the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, South and North Korea.

Comment

¶14. (C) Young students at Hangyerae and Heavenly Dream School were cheerful and curious to learn more about the United States. For these students, catching up with the South Korean youth -- educationally, culturally and economically -- will be tough, but doable given time. The older North Korean defectors at Hanawon and House of Life face a much bigger challenge navigating their new lives in the South Korean society because of a lack of education and training. Like immigrants in other countries, most North Korean defectors will continue to hold menial jobs, but the opportunities for the next generation will certainly improve. Unlike other immigrants, the North Korean defectors in South Korea have a genuine opportunity to integrate into the mainstream, but this will require considerable time.

STEPHEN